Walter E. Fluker*

The Politics of Conversion and The Civilization of Friday

At last he lays his head flat upon the ground, close to my foot, and sets my other foot upon his head, as he has done before, and after this made all signs to me of subjection, servitude, and submission imaginable, to let me know how he would serve me as long as he lived. I understood him in many things, and let him know I was very well pleased with him. In a little time I began to speak to him, and teach him to speak to me; and, first, I made him know his name should be called Friday, which was the day I saved his life. I likewise taught him to say master, and then let him know that was to be my name. [Robinson Crusoe regarding his man, Friday.][1]

African American Leadership In A New Key

With a renaissance in scholarship on Malcolm X (El Hajj Malik El Shabazz) and Martin Luther King, Jr., conversations within and beyond the African American community have focused on the political and social strategies of these two men as resources in articulating a new vision for the struggle against the jagged and complex congeries of race, gender, and class, and their impact on plight of African Americans. Sorely neglected in these conversations is the place of spirituality in the social and political thought

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[1] Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, with illustrations by N. C. Wyeth (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), p. 273.

and praxis of these two men. Beyond their respective approaches to the political and economic spheres of Black existence is a more profound and relevant legacy. Malcolm and Martin leave living testaments of their hope: an irrepressible hope that will not relinquish its hold on the redemptive possibilities inherent in human beings.

Their search for personal wholeness and transformation brought them to the forefront of a political movement that changed the direction of the nation and the world. But the crass and critical issues of our day demand that a "new breed of cat" come on the scene, who, like Malcolm and Martin, are bold and courageous enough to journey through the valley of tradition and orthodoxy. Men and women who are able to wage battle with the legions of doubts and fears that stand guard over our entry into a future laden with ambiguity. The lives of Malcolm and Martin, and the dangerous memories they leave, are summons for a new vanguard of visionaries: a generation of new leaders who are spiritually disciplined and intellectually astute, able to interpret the present madness that is upon us, and to prescribe new formulae and possibilities for a people rapidly losing hope.

Martin and Malcolm represent "dangerous memories" and redemptive possibilities in the struggle for justice. In Malcolm and Martin, spirituality and social transformation are the dominant themes which define and make available the resources for this hope. For King, this theme is the basis for his articulation of the beloved community ideal. For Malcolm, spirituality and social transformation are the keys which decipher the sphinx-like riddle of his ironic quest for just relations among human beings.

Make no mistake, Malcolm and Martin were different. Attempts to create complementarity between the two where it does not exist are unproductive and futile. But while there are distinct differences in approaches to their respective goals, beyond (perhaps, beneath) their differences in methodology and ideology lies the common quest for personal wholeness and identity in a recalcitrant,

racist society that militates against such possibility. The work of social transformation in both men is inextricably bound with their religious quests for authentic personhood. Their personal quests ultimately involve searches for radical change in public policy and practice. One can hardly miss this truth in reviewing the spiritual developments of these Black titans.[2]

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[2] "Dangerous memories fund a community's sense of dignity; they inspire and empower those who challenge oppression. Dangerous memories are a people's history of resistance and struggle, of dignity and transcendence in the face of struggle." Sharon Welch, "The Beloved Community," *Spirituality Today,* "For the Trumpet Shall Sound: Protest, Prayer, and Prophecy," 40 (Winter 1988)11-12; Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Society* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980)89. Nicolas Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), p. 47.

Malcolm speaks of his personal quest for wholeness at a number of places in his autobiography. Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X With the Assistance of Alex Haley and Introduction by M.S. Handler* (NY: Grove Press, 1964, 1965), pp. 187, 365, 368-369, 404, 408. David Garrow has maintained that the "kitchen vision" of January 27, 1956 in the early stages of the Montgomery boycott was the paradigmatic moment in King's spirituality. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958, 1964), pp. 58-63. King, "Our God is Able," in *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), p. 113-14. David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1986), pp. 57-58; David Garrow, "Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Spirit of Leadership," in *We Shall Overcome: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Black Freedom Struggle*, edited by Peter J. Albert and Ronald Hoffman (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), pp. 11-34; Lewis Baldwin, *There Is A Balm* (Fortress Press, 1992), p. 189; and Preston N. Williams, "The Public and Private Burdens of Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Christian Century* (February 25, 1987), pp. 198-99. Some of the works which examine convergences and differences in the two thinkers include: Lewis V. Baldwin, "Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Reassessment of the Relationship Between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr." *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 13:2 (1989), pp. 103-113; James H. Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books,1991); Robert Michael Franklin, *Liberating Visions: Human Fulfillment and Social Justice in African-American Thought* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990); Robert Michael Franklin, *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 21:4 (Harvard University, The Divinity School, 1992). See also, Perry, *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, Inc., 1991); Michael Dyson, "Who Speaks for Malcolm X? The Writings of Just About Everybody," *The New York Times Book Review* (November 29, 1992), p. 33; Clayborne Carson, "Malcolm X: The Man and the Myth," *The San Francisco Examiner*, November 22, 1992, D-9.

Cornel West has brilliantly analyzed the contemporary moral straitjacket which has stymied the potential for creative national leadership and wreaked deleterious effects on African American leadership in particular. He cites the foibles of structuralist and behaviorist interpretations and recommendations for those at the bottom of the American social ladder. He argues that this debate "conceals the most basic issue now facing black America: *the nihilistic threat to its very existence.*" Beyond political and economic remedies, while significant, the threat of personal meaningless, despair, and worthlessness, brought about in large part by unbridled market forces and political chicanery, is the real challenge that confronts African Americans and the national community. West calls for a new kind of moral leadership which moves beyond the "pitfalls of racial reasoning" and the lack of courage to address "*the market moralities of black life*" and "*the crisis of black leadership.*" He recommends "*a politics of conversion*" fueled by a love ethic which has historically sustained the African American community. Important for our purposes is his identification of memory and hope as key resources in the politics of conversion: "Self-love and love of others," he writes, "are both modes toward increasing self-valuation and encouraging political resistance in one's community. These modes of valuation and resistance are rooted in *subversive memory*—the best of one's past without romantic nostalgia— and guided by a universal ethic of love."[3]

West's call for a new kind of moral leadership emanating from the grassroots is not a new phenomenon in American society, but what is refreshing and potentially creative is his sensitivity to the interrelated necessities of personal and social transformation. A significant element of this new kind of leadership is the emphasis on transformation which requires a return to memory as a basis for hope

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[3] Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), "Nihilism in Black America," pp. 8-20.

without romanticization and trivilization of the arduous paths which must be trod in order to translate this memory into praxis. In this respect the dangerous memories of Martin and Malcolm are important, but not adequate in and of themselves to fuel the assault against hopelessness that plagues our beleaguered communities. While the dream of the beloved community of Martin Luther King, Jr. still inspires us to uplift the dignity and worth of human personality, even toward our enemies, his method of nonviolent direct action may not be adequate to transform the hardened and intransigent structures of a morally reprobate society. And likewise, while the rugged vision of African American unity, articulated by Malcolm X, still reminds us that self-love and militancy are the logical demands for powerless and oppressed peoples, still they do not answer the ultimate need for a relational love ethic in a universe that cannot exist without it. What we need is not an either/or alternative between Malcolm and Martin, or between militant aggression or moral suasion. We need rather a new creative vision which is a synthesis of both.

The scope and shape of this new vision will depend largely on our willingness as individuals and as a nation to enter the no-trespassing zones of this world system and to inquire about the meaning of our existence on these shores. More fundamentally, it will demand an internal revolution, in King's language, of values and priorities. In order to make this journey into the interior we need guides who have left maps of the spiritual landscape. It will require most of all, a radical conversion of our social understandings of self, which are the products of a competitive market economy that pits individuals and racial/ethnic groups against one another. For African Americans, in particular, it means literally a return to memory, a soul journey in the caves of our ancestors where we hear again the rhythmic murmurings of the Black and angry dead—but more so, where again we learn the lessons of those who surround us

as a great cloud of witnesses.[4]

The Civilization of Friday

Cornel West's call for a *politics of conversion* presupposes the nexus of memory and hope. African American leadership cannot begin this spiritual process until there is a willingness to return to its religio-cultural roots of sacrifice and service. This return to a sane place will require a radical deconstruction of self in the midst of a multiplicity of forces that stand guard over our entry into a new future. In other words, the politics of conversion presupposes psychic conversion. The psychic conversion of Malcolm and the transformed nonconformity which King talked about involve a type of existential death—a blessed irrationality born of the refusal to submit to market mentalities and cultural cages which inhibit the birthing of new names and redemptive possibilities.

The anatomy of the kind of personal transformation which is an integral dimension of the politics of conversion can be seen in the dynamics of the master/slave relation imbedded in the dominant discourse of Euro-western hegemonic practices. The civilization of Friday, Robinson Crusoe's man, offers some insight into the modalities of self-devaluation and the need to move beyond the superimposed categories of domination and subordination in search

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[4] Moral leadership refers to "the process of morality to the degree that leaders engage with followers on the basis of shared motives and values and goals." James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1979), p. 36. "The essence of leadership in any polity is the recognition of real need, the uncovering and exploiting of contradictions among values and between values and practice, the realigning of values, the reorganization of institutions where necessary, and the governance of change. Essentially the leader's task is consciousness-raising on a wide plane . . . A congruence between the need and value hierarchies would produce a powerful potential for the exercise of purposeful leadership." (Burns, 43-44) In this sense, moral leadership is transformational as opposed to transactional (e.g., Weber's distinction between an ethic of responsibility versus an ethic of ends: the former seeks purposeful, cooperative change based on inclusiveness and equality; the latter maintains the status quo by minimizing conflict through hegemonic practices).

of authentic selfhood. It is at once a window through which we can
see the underlying dynamics of slave morality and the internalized
gaze which inhibits conversation between the builders of the
American tower of Babel and the stones that the builders rejected.

The name given to the "savage" whom Crusoe rescued on
the deserted island, where he had shipwrecked twenty-three years
earlier, is of particular importance. He named him "Friday"—the
day of the week he "saved his life." The ascription "Friday" denotes
the day of the week in which the savage is brought into "real time",
that is, civilized time—the time of the master. Crusoe not only
names him, but in effect names his world, his etiquette, his lan-
guage, his symbols, his culture—indeed his humanity. In Crusoe's
mind, before meeting him, the child/savage was in bondage to the
elemental forces of nature. His existence is bestial, but the master
teaches him his language. Even more is at stake in Friday's civiliza-
tion. For Crusoe, it is the religion of Providence that legitimizes his
function as master and teacher. Race, religion, and culture meld
together in a seamless construction of hierarchy. In order for Friday
to be saved he must become civilized. Friday understands his role
and consciously subjects himself to his master.

"At last he lays his head flat upon the ground, close to my
foot, and sets my other foot upon his head, as he has done before,
and after this made all signs to me of subjection, servitude, and sub-
mission imaginable, to let me know how he would serve me as long
as he lived." Friday has learned through the appropriation of the
master's language that his place in the hierarchy of the cosmos is at
his master's feet. Incivility is sin, licentiousness, bestiality, mind-
lessness, chaos, and all manner of evil.

Better not get too loud, Friday! Don't touch holy things,
Friday! Be still, Friday! Refuse to be a body! Friday, you have nei-

ther voice nor eyes. Be *good*, Friday![5]

This particular sample of Western literary discourse pro-
vides a helpful entree into the struggle of African Americans to
achieve and conform to an image of self which is not catacombed in
the mindless mazes of subjection to an ethic which predisposes them
to a life of inferiority and second-class citizenship. But the chal-
lenge of African Americans to free themselves from the gaze of
Crusoe is double-edged. One cannot begin this conversation in a
vacuum. Friday cannot be free until he rebels against Crusoe.
Crusoe's identity, on the other hand, is bound to his perception of
Friday. Friday's rebellion creates a kind of cultural apoplexy in
which Crusoe is both victimizer and patient, because Crusoe—not
Friday—is the object of rebellion. Yet there is an even more nefar-
ious warfare raging within Friday. How can he destroy the master
without initiating his own demise?

America stands in the place of Crusoe, the civilizer and the
patient. Friday is the destroyer and redeemer. Friday's freedom is an
exercise in death. He must die in order to live, he must rebel in
order to hope. When Friday announces his intention, Crusoe tight-
ens the noose, but in tightening the noose he destroys himself.

Who *frees* Friday from himself? God, religion, politics, eco-
nomic development, and all the recommendations that shout at
him daily from a fragmented discourse which falls back on itself?[6]

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[5] Daniel Defoe's *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* is a classic, or as one commenta-
tor puts it, it is "universal and lasting." Written by Defoe and published in England in 1719,
the book was translated into French, German, and Dutch the following year, marking an
unprecedented series of translations into other languages. I make mention of its remarkable
origins in order to underscore its availability and popular ascent in the European mindscape
since the 18th century. In this respect, it is an exemplary text of the moral discourse and
metaphysics of civilization. Ronald Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th Century
America* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 108-144. "To speak means to be in a posi-
tion to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means
above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization." Frantz Fanon, *Black
Skin, White Masks* (Paladin, 1970), p. 13.

[6] Charles E. Scott, *The Question of Ethics: Nietzsche, Foucault, and Heidegger* (Bloomington
and Indianapolis,Indiana University Press, 1990).

No, Friday must free himself from Crusoe's gaze. This internalized look of the other, this stalking fear of madness. Friday must discover his name as a counter-name to the ascription which Crusoe has given—but even more, Friday must find a new name, a name not proscribed and prescribed by the master's time. Friday's rebellion is against his socially constructed self—he must for the first time see himself through his own eyes and speak with his own voice. This requires a journey into the "cave"—that trysting place where he wrestles with the shadows, the appearances that flash against wall of his consciousness—a consciousness shaped by years of bondage to the name, the thing outside of himself. It is at once recognition, defiance, and play: recognition of the twisted and contorted stare at one's self; insight into the incivility of the Cross which is a personal act of transgression and defiant speech; and linguistic play on a morality which signifies on all *good* Fridays.

A Strange Freedom

It is a strange freedom to be adrift in the world of men, to act with no accounting, to go nameless up and down the streets of other minds where no salutation greets and no sign is given to mark the place one calls one's own . . The name marks the claim a man stakes against the world; it is the private banner under which he moves which is his right whatever else betides. The name is a man's water mark above which the tide can never rise. It is the thing he holds that keeps him in the way when every light has failed and every marker has been destroyed. It is the rallying point around which a man gathers all that he means by himself. It is his announcement to life that he is present and accounted for in all his parts. To be made anonymous and to give the acquiescence of the heart is to live without life, and for such a

one, even death is no dying.

To be known, to be called by one's name, is to find one's place and hold it against the hordes of hell. This is to *know* one's value for one's self alone. It is to honor an act as one's very own, it is to live a life that is one's very own, it is to worship a God who is one's very own.[7]

Howard Thurman's work is an excellent place to begin this initial task of conversion, the transformation of subjugated consciousness. He often stated, "The time and place of a person's life on earth is the time and place of the body, but the meaning and significance of that life is as far-reaching and redemptive as the gifts, the dedication, the response to the demand of the times, the total commitment of one's powers can make it."[8] What does it mean to *live* life seriously (not to *take* life seriously)? To live freely and unencumbered by the necessity of always conforming to external things that limit our potential to be authentically human in the world? Thurman thought it demanded a journey into the interior, into those places we have sealed off and secured with no-trespassing signs. It meant, for him, an inward journey into dangerous territory, where the real issues of life and death must be confronted, where the "Angel with the flaming sword" greets us— where we are not allowed entry unless we yield "the fluid center of our consent."

There is in every person an inward sea, and in that sea there is an island and on that island there is an altar and standing guard before that altar is the "angel with

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[7] Howard Thurman, *The Inward Journey* (Richmond,IN: Friends United Press, 1971, 1980), p. 38.
[8] Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (San Francisco: Hartcourt, Janovich, Brace, 1979), p. 208.

the flaming sword." Nothing can get by that angel to be placed upon that altar unless it has the mark of inner authority. Nothing passes "the angel with the flaming sword" to be placed upon your altar unless it be a part of "the fluid area of your consent." This is your link with the Eternal.[9]

This journey into the interior, according to Thurman, is not extraordinary; in many respects, it is far removed from what we normally call "religion." The Angel with the flaming sword is encountered in the mundane, earthly experiences of being and living in the world. At any junction in the road there may suddenly appear a sign, a flash, a burning bush, which places us in candidacy for this experience. Often in struggle, in crisis, in the heart of suffering and trial, one encounters the Angel, the truth about one's self, the mendacious stereotypes about self and others, and the subtle and surreptious ways in which one has been named.

Luther Smith correctly observes that for Thurman "the crucible of relationship" provides the hermeneutical key for ascertaining meaning in the various modes of existence in which one finds oneself. In this perspective, epistemological and axiological questions are grounded in a moral anthropology that avoids the dichotomous portrayal of the self as an irreconcilable tension between nature and spirit. Rather, for Thurman, the self is essentially relational and agential. Ratiocination is a secondary act. "The deed reveals meaning. Meaning does not exist as a disembodied force, but it becomes evident through relationships." All meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action, and all meaningful action is for the sake of loving relationship. Religious faith, therefore, is not to be confused with dogmatic assertions fixed in creed and formal statements. Rather it has to do with "literal truth and the conviction it inspires." This truth is disclosed in creative encounter with

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9 Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press), p. 15.

a "Thou" in lived-community with others.[10]

Thurman emphasized the dynamic, intuitive nature of truth. He characterized intuitive knowledge as "immediate, direct, and not an inference from logic . . . It is an awareness of literal truth directly perceived." In Thurman's conceptualization of spirituality and social transformation, which he referred to as "the inner life and world-mindedness," the individual is the point of departure. A persistent note in his thinking is that one must begin with oneself, with one's own "working paper." The development of a sense of self is the basis upon which one comes to understand one's own unique potential and self-worth. Without a sense of self, the person drifts aimlessly through life without a true understanding of his or her place in existence. A healthy sense of self is garnered out of a dynamic tension between the individual's self-fact and self-image.

The person's self-fact is her or his inherent worth as a child of God. It is the central fact that one is part of the very movement of life itself. The individual's self-image is formed by relationships with others, and to a large extent, self-image determines one's destiny. However, the individual's case must ultimately rest with his or her self-fact of intrinsic worth. Thurman writes, "The responsibility for living with meaning and dignity can never be taken away from the individual." This is a significant point for his treatment of the individual's response to dehumanizing onslaughts like racism and

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[10] Luther E. Smith, "Intimate Mystery: Howard Thurman's Search for Ultimate Meaning (1900 - 1981)," in *Ultimate Reality and Meaning: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Philosophy of Understanding* 11 (June 1988):94-98. See also, John H. Cartwright, "The Religious Ethics of Howard Thurman," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* (Fall 1984/Spring 1985):22-34; and Walter G. Muelder, "The Structure of Howard Thurman's Religious Social Ethics," *Debate and Understanding*, edited by Ricardo A. Millet, Special Edition (Spring 1982):7-13; John Macmurray, *The Self As Agent* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1957), p. 15; and Nicolas Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), p. 47.

other forces that work against human potential and community.[11] Consequently, his usage of terms like "inner life" or "inner awareness" refer to more than the formal discursive activity of the mind, but rather include the entire range of the individual's self-awareness.[12] "Inner life" means

> . . . the awareness of the individual's responsiveness to realities that are transcendent in character, emanating from a core of Reality which the individual is aware and of which the individual is also aware that he is a part. The inner life, therefore, is activity that takes place within consciousness, but does not originate there and is a part of a Reality central to all life and is at once the ground of all awareness. It is there that man becomes conscious of his meaning and destiny as a child, an offspring of God.[13]

The "interiority of religious experience," as I am using it, is synonymous with Thurman's terminology, "the inner life." "Interiority" means to belong to the inner constitution or concealed nature of something; it connotes dimensionality, that which lies away from the border or shore. For Thurman, therefore, religious experience is a journey into the inner regions of self; an exploration into that which is normally concealed from the conscious mind. It

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[11]Howard Thurman, *The Creative Encounter* (Richmond; Friends United Press, 1972)pp. 46,19. See also his "Mysticism and Social Change: Mysticism — An Interpretation," *Eden Seminary Bulletin* (1939)3-10. Thurman, *Deep is the Hunger* (Richmond; Friends United Press, 1975), pp. 62,64,93; and Thurman, "What Can I Believe In?" *Journal of Religion and Health,*12 (November 1972)111-119; Thurman, *Disciplines,* (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1973), p. 57; and *Search for Common Ground* (NY: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 21.

[12]Thurman, "The Inner Life and World Mindedness," in *Christian Leadership In a World Society: Essays In Honor of Conrad Henry Moehlman* (Rochester, NY: Colgate Rochester Divinity School, 1945), p. 188.

[13] *Ibid.*

is in this experience of self-exploration that one discovers what she or he amounts to, one's inherent value and worth as a child of God.[14]

Since the cultivation of the inner life is the basis for the development of a genuine sense of self and authentic existence in the world, it is in this process that one discovers one's name and destiny as a child of God. Thurman is acutely aware of the danger of subjectivism and the privatization of meaning implied in the emphasis on the development of inner consciousness. He guards against this tendency by accentuating the need for empirical verification of what one experiences in her or his inner life. "The real questions at issue here," he contends, "are, how may a man know he is not being deceived? Is there any way by which he may know beyond doubt, and therefore with verification, that what he experiences is authentic and genuine?"[15] Religious faith, therefore, is "the tutor" or the "unseen model" by which one structures the facts

[14] Religious experience is defined by Thurman as "the conscious and direct exposure of the individual to God. Such an experience seems to the individual to be inclusive of all the meaning of his life—there is nothing that is not involved." Thurman, *The Creative Encounter*, p. 20.

[15] Thurman, *Creative Encounter*, 57. Rational coherence between the inner experience of self and the social world is the method employed to test for self-deception. He argues that "Whatever seems to deny a fundamental structure of orderliness upon which rationality seems to depend cannot be countenanced." Ibid, 57-58. Walter G. Muelder suggests that the underlying ethical theory which is operative in this construal is neither heteronomous, nor autonomous, but theonomous: "This means that the imperatives are not imposed from external sources, nor completely devised by inner personal mandates, but express at the deepest level a metaphysical divine moral order which is also the rational law of a person's own being. There is a meeting place for the communication between God and the person, a place of yielding private, personal will to transcending purposes that are at the same time common ground. Here revelation and intuition meet, a place rich with the sense of the ultimate worth of the individual as a private and social person." Walter G. Muelder, "The Structure of Howard Thurman's Religious Social Ethics," p. 9; Nicolas Berdyaev argues that emergence from subjectivity proceeds along two distinct lines: objectivization and transcension or transcendence, the former leading to bondage because it alienates the divine image from itself which is personality, and the latter leading to authentic freedom because it raises the person to the level of the transubjective, to the realm of Spirit, which is freedom. See Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, p. 29.

of his or her experience. For this reason, Thurman counseled:

> [T]he person concerned about social change must not
> only understand the materials with which he has to do,
> the things which he is trying to manipulate, to reorder, to
> refashion, but again and again he must expose the roots
> of his mind to the literal truth that is the tutor of the
> facts, the orderer and reorderer of the facts of his experi-
> ence.[16]

This must be done, Thurman contended, so that in the quest for social justice, one's vision of society never conforms to some external pattern, but is "modeled and shaped in accordance to the innermost transformation that is going on in his spirit."[17] Accordingly, it was his insistence that those who were engaged in acts of liberation continually examine the sources of their motivation and the ways in which the circling series of social processes which they seek to change are related to their spiritual pilgrimage. Always, the primary questions for the social activist are, *What are you trying to do with your life? What kind of person are you trying to become?*"[18]

It was Thurman's conviction that the individual in his or her actions "is trying to snare into the body of his facts, his conviction of those facts." He cautioned, however, that faith thusly understood always runs the risk of becoming idolatrous, as in patriotic visions of "the American way."[19] Consequently, one must always examine the motivational content of action that involves a tutoring

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[16] Thurman, "He Looked For A City." Taped Sermon, Marsh Chapel, Boston University, January 2, 1955, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University.

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] See Thurman, *Disciplines*, pp. 26-37, where he discusses three primary questions related to the discipline of commitment. They are respectively, "Who am I?," "What do I want?," and "How do I propose to get it?"

[19] Thurman, "He Looked For A City."

of the will by the unseen model that, for Thurman, was the truth which is resident within the individual. Here the issues of *identity*, *purpose*, and *method* are combined in relation to the social context in which the individual finds himself or herself.

For the marginalized person, this exploration into interiority is especially significant since it underscores the preeminence of self-actualization in the midst of recalcitrant and obtrusive power arrangements that war against personal meaning and social space. According to Thurman, there is within each individual a basic need to be cared for and understood in a relationship with another at a point that is beyond all that is good and evil. In religious experience, this inner necessity for love is fulfilled in encounter with God and in community with others. In the presence of God and in relation with others, the person is affirmed and becomes aware of being dealt with totally.

> Whether he is a good person or a bad person, he is being dealt with at a point beyond all that is limiting, and all that is creative within him. He is dealt with at the core of his being, and at that core he is touched and released.[20]

As one dares to ask the primary questions of identity, purpose, and method, and is willing to be tutored by the "sound of the genuine" that is within,[21] a re-freshing occurs; a new sense of self

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[20] Howard Thurman, *The Growing Edge* (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1974), p. 68. See also, Thurman, *The Creative Encounter*, p. 115. Luther Smith's perceptive analysis of relationality as the hermeneutical key to Thurman is helpful. He cautions that, "Thurman's introspective approach to reality and meaning should not be interpreted as a self-centered exercise. He begins with himself, but moves out to society as an arena of discovery and involvement. Thurman says that the *sense* of self may precede the sense of community and the history which forms it, but in fact the self is shaped by community. Community, and its history, precede the self; we are born into community." Smith, "Intimate Mystery," p. 91.

[21] See Thurman, "Meaning is Inherent in Life," in *The Inward Journey*, pp. 14-15

and Presence emerge which enables one to re-enter the struggle with new courage and determination. Thurman understood this quest forpersonal space to involve defiant activity, for it presupposes that the one's liberative quest in society cannot ultimately be divorced from one's wrestling with the internal issues of power and dominance.[22] Jesus, like the rest of humanity, was not immune from the dilemmas of existence and the temptations to personally dominate others and to cling to security and comfort. Jesus's defiance is best articulated in his conscious choice to go to Jerusalem though he knew it meant death to challenge a obdurate culture.[23]

Ultimately, the interiority of religious experience brings us to crossroads where we must "choose."[24] Thurman believed that this is the faith that is courage and the courage that is faith. No one escapes this awful demand, especially no one who dares to challenge the political and economic structures which name one's position in the world. The challenge before the leadership in African American communities, and indeed the leadership of the nation, is one that calls forth this daring to enter the unsafe places of the transformed nonconformists. This daring to speak to the world out of the depths of a new-found, twice-born courage. It is an encounter with the Crucified One, that dangerous memory from the past and the redemptive possibility of the present. It is for this reason that Black theological discourse must explore more intensely the relationship of spirituality and social transformation and the nexus of memory and hope in the liberation of Friday.

[22] Thurman explores these issues full-blown in *Jesus and the Disinherited*, (Richmond; Friends United Press, 1981); see also, Howard Thurman, *Temptations of Jesus: Five Sermons Given by Dean Howard Thurman in Marsh Chapel, Boston University, 1962* (Reprinted Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1978); and Howard Thurman, "The Hasty Word" in *The Creative Encounter*, pp. 104-105.

[23] Thurman, *The Temptations of Jesus*, pp. 58-62.

[24] This was the basis for Thurman's perception of the church as a resource for activists: "To me it was important that individuals who were in the thick of social change would be able to find renewal and fresh courage in the spiritual resources of the church. There must be provided a place, a moment, when a person could declare, 'I choose!'" Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (San Francisco: Hartcourt, Janovich, Brace, 1979), p. 160.